

Battle continues over Rt. 33 funds
Officials prod feds to hand over emergency cash for bridge repair.

Wednesday, July 28, 2004

By **ALYSSA YOUNG**
The Express-Times

PALMER TWP. -- All that remains of the southbound Route 33 bridge over the Bushkill Creek are parts of its concrete piers.

Workers plan to use them as temporary platforms while they replace the demolished span with a seemingly sinkhole-proof structure.

They started tearing down the 34-year-old bridge last month to protect it from a disaster like the one that damaged the northbound bridge 80 feet to its east.

A sinkhole opened Jan. 24 beneath one of the piers supporting that bridge. Traffic has flowed over its replacement since June 25.



During intermittent rain Tuesday, crews started drilling holes into bedrock as deep as 300 feet below ground level so they can install foundations that will underpin the new southbound bridge's abutments.



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Pennsylvania Department of Transportation spokesman Ronald Young Jr. said Tuesday recent heavy rains have not dampened workers' progress. PennDOT still expects to complete the bridge by Thanksgiving, he said.

Meanwhile, officials continue pleading for federal emergency money to pay for the work so they can avoid postponing other area projects.

Young said PennDOT has received a letter from the Federal Highway Administration that says the southbound bridge replacement, which is a preventive measure, does not qualify for the same emergency funds that will pay for the northbound project.

In February, the federal government pledged to pay 80 percent of the estimated \$6 million price tag to build a new Route 33 north bridge. The actual cost of the finished bridge could not be determined Tuesday.

A new Route 33 south bridge is expected to cost at least \$3.3 million.

Unless the federal government allocates new money or PennDOT finds another source of cash, two other bridge repairs in Northampton County and six other projects in the region will be put on hold.

The two county projects include a Route 512 bridge repair in Wind Gap and a Route 191 bridge repair in Washington Township.

"I don't think the department has given up all hope," Young said.

In a letter to the editor published Tuesday in The Express-Times, Federal Highway Administrator Mary E. Peters criticized a July 14 editorial that accused the government of "splitting hairs" when it said the southbound project does not qualify for emergency money. Peters wrote that her department has authorized \$4 million for the project.

But the money from the federal Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program already was coming to the state and was earmarked for other projects.

The Federal Highway Administration approved last month's decision by the Lehigh Valley Transportation Study coordinating committee to reallocate the money, along with a \$1 million state match, to pay for the southbound bridge instead.

"Our prompt response marks the second time that the Bush administration has quickly supported funding for the Route 33 bridges," Peters wrote in the letter to the editor.

Gerald Seyfried, Northampton County's representative on the committee, said the LVTS voted to reallocate the money only if more federal money does not come through.

"We stole from Peter to pay Paul," Seyfried said. "What do you do, let the bridge sink and say it's an emergency? That's very poor planning on our part."

Michael Kaiser, the committee's secretary and executive director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, requested more federal money in two July 15 letters he sent to James A. Cheatham, the administrator of the Pennsylvania division of the Federal Highway Administration, and Allen D. Biehler, the state secretary of transportation.

"To raise money for the work in the current construction season, (PennDOT has) taken funds from eight other bridge projects in the Lehigh Valley"



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transportation improvements program, Kaiser wrote. "In our view, the FHWA should be providing supplemental emergency funds to finish this job."

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., also continues to push for the emergency funds, his spokesman Charles Robbins said.

The senator has received no response to a June 14 letter he sent to U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta requesting help from the federal Emergency Relief Fund, Robbins said.

In a related matter, PennDOT reminds motorists traveling to Pocono Raceway this weekend to consider using roads other than Route 33.

The bridge construction has reduced northbound and southbound traffic to a single lane between Routes 248 and 191.

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